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NEW YORK, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15, 1922.

Plays and Players in These Parts

THE REVIEWING STAND

By Alexander Woolcott

RE-ENTER the First Grave Digger, breathless. In the distance are heard faint catcalls, laughter and the sound of people dancing in the street. He sits down, mops his brow and gazes around him a little bewildered.

His bewilderment is distant kin to that of the young newspaper man whom Arthur Brisbane engaged long ago as Washington correspondent for whatever New York daily he was then directing. The new boy halted him in an abstracted flight across the littered city room. "I'm leaving for Washington on the midnight, Mr. Brisbane," he said. "Have you any instructions?" The busy Brisbane gazed at him as though he seemed vaguely familiar, identified him at last, paused as though to rake his own thoughts and murmured: "Instructions? Instructions? Oh, yes," he added, just as he started on his way. "I remember what it was I wanted to tell you. Be brilliant. Be brilliant."

On such occasions one feels a little too much like our dear friend Pip, hauled from the village forge, thrust into his stiff, clattering Sunday best and ordered to report at Satis House for the amusement of that withered reclus, Miss Havisham. Through damp, echoing corridors he was led at last to the dim lit room, where the gloomy, old lady, eyeing him coldly, issued her instructions. She said: "Play, boy."

One should start on such an enterprise with a few decent misgivings, in the manner recommended by one of the wisest men alive when a bouncing English actor came to him for preferment. It is our favorite story. It was on the eve of one of the annual revivals of "Peter Pan" in London when this fellow, who had played one of the roles with some success before, went to Barrie with the suggestion that thereafter he should be featured in the program. "And what might featuring mean?" asked Barrie, with disarming innocence. The actor patiently explained that while he could scarcely ask to be starred, he did hope that in the playbills his name would be separated out from the common herd of the cast by a large AND before it. The AND would constitute the featuring. "AND?" said Barrie skeptically. "Why not BUT?"

Certainly one might do worse on such an occasion than appear in the program as the First Grave Digger. It is true a dramatic critic thus labeled is entitled to suspect that the term is intended as a reproach. But after all, the First Grave Digger, as we recall him, was a cheerful fellow. A little dogmatic perhaps, and annoyingly sarcastic in method. Then too he was rather given to misquotation and a pretense of learning that he did not possess. And it is true he did not arrive until the last act. But a good scout withal—properly detached in his viewpoint and ready with a smile for the most funeral occasion.

We suspect, however, that the ancient custom of referring to the play reviewers as the grave diggers or the death watch arises from one of two delusions which seem firmly rooted in what might be called the theatrical mind.

The first delusion is that the critics are immensely cheered up when a play turns out to be a sorry mess. This notion animated the unfortunately recognizable portrait of your correspondent drawn in naughty mood some time ago by that mild caricaturist, W. E. Hill. He was shown standing, long faced and melancholy, in front of a theater between the acts of a premiere, and could be heard muttering: "I'm afraid it will be a success." Now it is a ludicrous idea that the critics relish nothing in the world so much as a rattling good failure.

You might as well say of the base-ball reporters that they go to the Polo Grounds praying that the game will be dull. As we recall the state of mind of that medieval prototype of ours in poisonous Venice, the Taster employed to protect the Doge, it was never his way to sigh and say: "A murrain seize the insipid dishes these caltiffs serve my master. Here I've been savoring them a full fortnight and not a drop of prussic acid have I tasted yet."

The other delusion is that it is part of the critic's business to guess whether or not a play will prosper. That is sheer nonsense. Such property is dependent on too many factors that are invisible, incalculable, arbitrary. And, besides, it is the playboy's sole task to describe in the most communicable language he can lay his hands on at the moment the impression made upon himself by the play as performed. That is the beginning and the end of his role in the theater.

But the delusion has cropped up again in a recent statement issued by the estimable George M. Cohan and printed in a theatrical weekly called *Varity*. He was discussing the occasionally deleterious effect of frosty reviews on the box office and mentioned proudly the \$50,000 advertising expense he had incurred to make a silk purse out of that celebrated sow's ear, "The Tavern." Some, but not all, of the playboys had been disappointed by that coarsened burlesque, and said as much. Yet the fool thing achieved some popularity and jogged along throughout the season—never an overwhelming hit but a prosperous venture in the long run. "This proving," says Mr. Cohan, in effect, "that the critics were wrong." Also proving, if that is so, that the insect play produced in this country in the last ten years was "Peg o' My Heart" and that Eugene O'Neill is nowhere near so good a dramatist as Samuel Shipman. Which, as the mathematicians say and Mr. Cohan knows in his heart, is absurd.

This bit of bemused thinking on Cohan's part popped out in a discussion provoked by the semi-annual charge that there is a ring of critics in this mad town. It is actually charged that the reviewers for the different dailies and weeklies meet and discuss plays. The police are also looking into a rumor that there is a Bar Association in West Forty-fourth street where, according to the sworn testimony of horrified passersby, lawyers are seen roving in and out. On the basis of this disclosure a faithful turncoat ran blabbing to the publishers with a wild tale about a secret organization known as the Authors' League.

Unfortunately in the case of the critics, the charge is baseless. The reviewers of plays in our town are a wildly variegated lot ranging in age from 2 years old (or thereabouts) to 35. They represent a curious assortment of race, creed and tint. Some grow sulky from time to time and don't speak to their playmates in the lobby. It is true that five or six of those who write either about plays or movies or music in this town are likely to meet any day at luncheon or across the



Flora Sheffield, who brings gentle charm and an increasing skill to two roles in "The Faithful Heart," an English romance, at the Broadhurst.

that is brilliant and joyous and artful beyond words. His smile, therefore—the most remarkable smile of his time—is wider than ever. (Nor is his confederate, Gest, precisely in tears.) Among the new things are two amazing dances by Kotechetovsky, a delightful mad rendering of "Maiden's Song" and a grand spectral number in which *Katinka* is wooed and won by our friend, the previously unemotional *Captain of the Wooden Soldiers*. It is intimated—indeed, Balfour proudly announces—that the fourth bill will include a christening.

A PLAY FOR SALE.

Frank Craven is fabricating a comedy for Chie Sale, though it is not known at this writing whether the famous shipwreck will be featured in it. The title of this rural piece, singularly enough, is "Early to Bed." When Craven goes soon to Chicago with "The First Year," he plans to work with Sale on the play, since the professor will be detained for a long vaudeville season in the Loop.

On the way out Craven, at the suggestion of Gov. James L. Davis of Ohio, will stop off at Cleveland and spend part of a day at the marriage license bureau, telling newlyweds how to keep out of trouble at home.

RUGGLES' GREAT ADVENTURE.

Charles Ruggles, who has just gone into the east of "A Clean Town," the latest distillation of Nugent talent, recently grew a beard from sheer unbridled devotion to his art, but this effort to sink his face in his part proved a forlorn hope. It was when he was with the Woods in "Lonely Wives," trying to make the public digest this comedy on tour. The point of the piece turned on a double for the leading man, but doubles are very hard to obtain except in fiction. To make it easier to develop a twin for him, the comedian decided to write whiskers into the part.

Nay, more, he resolved to grow his own, since a false beard might fall off and embarrass him dreadfully. So he let about the laborious process of growing his own regardless of what the Lambs Club might say.

And then just when he had brought the beard to the pink of perfection, the show closed.

Ruggles's beard closed with it. He mottled. The British game of "beaver" seems likely to come over here, anyhow. But it was a fine beard while it lasted.

The Guild started its season on Monday night with a vivid production of the startling Czech play, "R. U. R.," a merciless and incredibly exciting satire wherein the labor problem of the day is neatly solved by the manufacture of countless unconsidered mannequins called robots. The robots are mechanical creatures without feeling or aspiration or resentment. They serve well for the dull and distasteful jobs that keep the wheels of civilization turning. It is extremely convenient, but in the end the robots rebel all over the world and the play proper, before its weak epilogue, ends on the final extinction of the human race. You see the last handful of human beings crouched in a barricaded room, spread beneath whose windows are acres upon acres of these silent, indistinguishable robots. They had been made strong to do the world's labor. They had been trained in arms to fight the world's wars. So they are terrible in their blundering strength, when, huge and irresistible, they force their way in at last—hulking, black nightmares silhouetted for one ominous moment against the crimsoning sky—as, one by one, they climb over the balcony railing and drop silent into the room. The piece will be hailed with joy by the Socialist minded folk—hailed by mistake, we think, just as we all sometimes waste fondly to find, on an approaching figure, only to find, on closer scrutiny, that we are being riveted by the chill and inopportune eyes of an offended stranger. This "R. U. R.," like Tolstoy's "Masse-Mensel" and his "Machinisme" are plays of revolution all three, but they end, one and all, in the ashes of disillusion. They are plays of revolt—and despair.

As for the third bill of the "Chauve-Souris," it is flawless—immeasurably the best of the three. Perhaps, however, it seems the most so because of its sharp contrast to the recent and rather forlorn effort to share its glory made in another theater—a flattering imitation made by some one who did not happen to know Balfour's secret. With his troubadours keyed to concert pitch, the round comedian from Moscow now introduces a program

of va-t-en guerre" and a grand spectral number in which *Katinka* is wooed and won by our friend, the previously unemotional *Captain of the Wooden Soldiers*. It is intimated—indeed, Balfour proudly announces—that the fourth bill will include a christening.

A FAMILIAR COMPLAINT.

Four people who try not to miss anything recommended as fine in the theater went to see "Rose Bernd" last Saturday afternoon. Since then they have had animated and baffling discussions concerning the plot of the play; whether Mrs. Flamm is wife or mother of *Christopher*, whether *Ross* was "right" before *Christopher's* relations with her began, what caused her to change her mind about marrying *August* at the magistrate's, and whether she really killed her child or had hallucinations as a result of her suffering. Now you'll say: "These people are morons or are very deaf."

In defense of their mentality, I'll say that one is a recent Oxford graduate, one a high school teacher, one a trainer of teachers and one a newspaper man of long experience. Deaf, then? But they heard every word of *Surekman*, for whom, as a consequence, they have a fondness as undeserved as it is immoral. They heard one-half of *Ross's* speeches, one-third of *Flamm's*, and not a word of Mrs. *Flamm's*. Imagine how thrilling those long conversations in *Flamm's* living room were under such conditions. Let me say that they paid \$120 a piece for the tickets at the box office ten days before the performance.

I know that managers do not pay much heed to complaints of this sort, so I am writing to a critic in the hope that before he recommends performances to the public he'll do one of two things: either spurn the second or third row orchestra seat given him for the first night and sit in the balcony or, else, in the criticism, say: "This is en-

joyable as far back as the ninth or tenth row in the orchestra."

Alas for my party! They'll have to buy the book and try to fit the words they read into the pantomime they saw.

NEW YORK, Oct. 8, 1922.

TO THE DRAMATIC EDITOR:

In reading the plot of Karl Capell's "R. U. R." it sounded vaguely familiar. I looked up my "economic" file and discovered a 3,400 word narrative in the Sunday Call Magazine, summer of 1914 (exact date missing), entitled "The Last Man on Earth" by H. J. Barratt, which is identically the same story except that it lacks Capell's sop to the sentimentalists. The mechanical creatures in this version after exterminating human life, conclude the story by force by a grand review down Riverside Drive, down Broadway to the Battery, thence into the Bay. Curtain.

Doubtless a coincidence, but an odd one. ROBERT STACKPOLE, STAMFORD, Conn., Oct. 10, 1922.

MISS MENKEN APPROACHES.

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Tallulah Bankhead, who contributes a lot of good looks and considerable ability to the leading role of "The Exciters" at the Times Square Theater.

My Dear Sir:

It seems probable now that the next play by A. A. Milne to be produced in this city will not be "The Lucky Ones," which is to be produced by the Theater Guild, but "The Romantic Age," another earlier Milne comedy which has waited overlong for its first public performance in New York. This is the fragile and charming piece about a young man who stepped in the romance of the great days that she looks for a Lancelot to come riding through the forest to claim her and so has no eye for the goaty young men in tweed jackets that flock wistfully around.

This play was first acted here in Madison Square by the Amateur Comedy Club one week last Winter and though it is a full mile from the Lambs Club, a good many producers from the professional theater went down to see it. This led to a spirited contest for the American rights. Sidney Blackmer wanted it and so did Frederick Stanhope, who was in London at that time. But, since Milne has both an English and an American agent, advance royalties were accepted from both bidders. When the ensuing excitement had subsided, it was found that Mr. Stanhope had spoken first, so he is to make the production.

Leslie Howard, who scored so emphatically in Milne's "Truth About Blayde" and who was last seen here with Marie Tempest, plays the role of the young broker who is on his way from a fancy dress ball when his car dumps him on the roadside and thus he is a medieval figure astray under a midsummer moon when first our heroine, who is at the aforesaid romantic age, claps her delighted eyes upon him. The role of the aforesaid heroine, which was assigned to Margalo Gillmore, has been assigned to Margalo Gillmore.

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TALK OF BROADWAY

THROUGHOUT the ranks of the theater a greater interest is accumulating in John Barrymore's "Hamlet" than has forerun any Shakespearean production made in this city in the last twenty years. When it became known that the business of selecting a cast would begin one day last week more than five hundred actors crowded the entrance to the Plymouth Theater, where Arthur Hopkins functions as a director. It is reliably reported that every American actress under the age of thirty-seven has been reading the role of *Ophelia* in the hall bedrooms and minor flats of New York in case the lightning should happen to strike.

The curiosity centers on two questions: Who will be the *Ophelia*? And in what manner has Robert Edmond Jones designed the Elsinore? As to the *Ophelia*, it may be guessed that it will be some actress who never before has attempted the role. Rumor has been hovering uncertainly over the names of Peggy Wood, who, however, is booked for a new play by Zella Sears next month; Genevieve Tobin, a Hopkins protégée not yet committed to any other play, though repeatedly mentioned as a candidate for Miss Adams' old role in "Peter Pan"; Vivian Tobin, her younger sister; Rosalind Fuller, known chiefly as a singer of ballads, and Mary Ellis, a young actress who, as it happens, is definitely cast as *Veronica* in the Belasco production of "The Merchant of Venice."

As for the setting, it may also be guessed that Mr. Jones has not continued in the strain of the severe atmosphere which he set the stage for *Lionel Barrymore's* "Macbeth." After the howl that went up on the first view of that distracting investiture, Mr. Jones was quoted as muttering that he will continue so to design the sets for Shakespeare's plays until the public should catch up with him, even if it killed Arthur Hopkins in the process. On the other hand it is fairly well known that, mingled in that howl, were a few acid remarks from John Barrymore himself. So it seems altogether unlikely that the new Elsinore will bear any resemblance to the distinctly malarious scheme which riveted the eye throughout the first act of "Macbeth" or that the ghost of Hamlet's father, if indeed, he is embodied in any form at all, will be embodied on the stage in the manner of the Klu Klux Klan which danced around the candelion in the witches' scene.

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This is expected to be John Murray Anderson's last season with the "Greenwich Village Follies," as his three year contract with the Toilemians, whereby he received royalty as well as salary, has now run down. He is planning to branch out for himself, and the new musical show which he is now preparing, and which he wrote with the late Frederic S. Isham, is meant to be a transitional phase, so that one may presently see John Murray Anderson engaged with the drama, pure and simple and unadorned. He is also to stage a revue in London this fall for Charles E. Cochran, the Macosens of the British stage.

In passing, it is said that a large part of the money that was melted into producing this year's "Greenwich Village Follies" came from the pockets of Joe Leblanc, via the ticket office. The show last season cost \$10,000, but the current offering is said to have been presented at more reasonable rates.

"Blossom Time," which has already been banded about between two theaters, will once more be torn up by the roots from Johnson's Theater, where it has been running since the first of the season. The change is necessitated by the fact that the "Blossom Time" has been running since the first of the season. The show last season cost \$10,000, but the current offering is said to have been presented at more reasonable rates.

George McFarlane was reported to be on the verge of leaving the new Shubert opera, "Springtime of Youth," but this turns out to be a blank report. He still remains with the piece, and his last season was in Baltimore, heading for New York.

Ned Wynburn will not stage a revival of "Ivanna" with James T. Powers, as erroneously stated elsewhere during the week. Instead he will direct that star in a musical adaptation of "Somewhere in Time," the new name of which still lurks in outer darkness. It will be uncovered at Stamford on November 15.

Winchell Smith has gone to his home at Farmington, Conn., in order to tinker upon "The Wheel," which he still considers a masterpiece in circulation again. He will also work on an idea for another play, which he will write solo and let John Golden steer into the world.

"Merton of the Movies" will be shipped to Atlantic City and Philadelphia for a week, leaving the seat before opening up on New York at the Pittsburgh, by the same indefatigable authors, George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, which after some spring training, has been laid up for repairs, is also due for a ride into Manhattan.

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